

Chapter Title: Introduction

Book Title: Neither use nor ornament

Book Subtitle: A cultural biography of clutter and procrastination

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Published by: Manchester University Press. (2024)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.16013623.6>

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Introduction

Neither Use Nor Ornament is a book about making a mess and putting things off. It takes a long, hard look at the phenomenon of personal productivity, including David Allen's Getting Things Done® (GTD®) method, and makes a case for thinking twice about its recommendations and prescriptions.¹ The main contention over the following pages is that far from representing honest-to-goodness improvements in workplace practices and relations, or designs for living where we can gain more with less effort, personal productivity systems have a darker side, which bears comparison to Fordist interference.

The book focuses upon the shadow which is cast when it comes to the judgements that accrue around *failing* to be sufficiently organised. GTD®'s ambitions of relaxed productivity and fun come, it will be shown, at a price – one paid, in the main, by those who are unable to go with the flow. So, this is a book about personal productivity told through what have been identified in its industry of hints, tips and strategies as the two key obstacles to living the well-managed, organised life: clutter and procrastination. The shadow condition to a system like Allen's GTD® is a life both muddled and deferred, where cluttered environments and procrastinatory habits interfere with the capacity to 'win' at work and life. In many self-help guides, clutter and procrastination are conjoined afflictions, where piles of stuff evidence the putting-off of decisions or where material mess and disorder is seen to betray an interior psychic state of mess and disorder.²

In recent years – roughly speaking, from the 1990s onwards – the moral imperative to declutter one's life and to seize the day has gained significant momentum, to the extent that behaviours which only a few decades ago were incorporated into daily living, or tolerated as mild eccentricity (collecting, for example), are fast becoming the site of sensationalist treatment. Scott Herring, in his book on hoarding, calls this out as 'object panic', identifying popular culture and reality television as crucial sites that narrativise, dramatise, amplify and pathologise our relations with our possessions.³ Such panic raises fundamental questions that form key concerns for this book: why and how have clutter and procrastination come to be seen in terms of a moral failing? What is at stake in the moral imperative to declutter and live in the moment? What, exactly, is the power of now? What are the social, political and cultural implications of contemporary personal

productivity advice, with its obsession for eliminating clutter and procrastination *for good?*⁴

Between Henry Ford and David Allen lies a century's worth of attempts to improve efficiency. The book's Prologue is intended to function both as frame-tale – in its temporality, it captures one hundred years of productivity – and as fable, laying out the cheerleader's version of events when it comes to the contemporary nature of work. There is a strong myth in personal productivity that we can have it all. 'Do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life', so the saying goes, or as Allen and his followers would have it, with the right systems and a positive attitude, we can get everything done effortlessly, freeing up time for even more fun and creativity (beyond the fun and creativity that Allen promises to bring to the daily grind). Looking behind the myth, then, takes some doing, given its attractiveness. Who doesn't want to make life easier? Who doesn't want to get more done in less time? Who doesn't want to be more productive whilst at the same time being more relaxed? Who doesn't want to flow through life with ease?

Henri Lefebvre, in his painstaking, three-volume study of the everyday in post-war France, isolates a useful place to start when it comes to questioning projections of the good life, in that any emergent ideal, for him, produces the equivalent of a photographic negative, a 'reverse image': 'As necessarily as it produces machines and men-machines, the bourgeois world produces deviants'.⁵ Just as Ford's men-machines, who, in 'The Manual of Procedures', were divided into the slovenly and the productive, deviants and worker bees, Allen's vision of the smart GTD[®]er, in a state of perfect readiness for whatever befalls them, can be seen to be shackled to a life that is burdensome and snagged in stuff. So, if flow is the optimum state, where productivity is at its peak, its 'reverse image' is one marked by lack of achievement, by the frustration and waste of energy, by *clutter* and *procrastination*.

Such 'reverse images' are rife in popular media, where spectacular portrayals of cluttered, materially overburdened and stalled lives grace our TV screens on a daily basis.⁶ Furthermore, the increasing pathologisation and medicalisation of clutter and procrastination is evident in clinical literature. In recent revisions to the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, where hoarding disorder is treated as a distinct condition, clutter becomes readable as a symptom of mental illness and behavioural dysfunction.⁷ At the same time, procrastination and task avoidance behaviours are seen to be associated symptoms of hoarding disorder, in that excessive worry about making the right choice is said to lead to a delay in making decisions. Procrastination is, thus, seen to generate clutter, as mundane decisions about objects and possessions are put off, making clutter the visible indicator of interior processes: 'many people with hoarding disorder also have associated problems such as indecisiveness, perfectionism, procrastination, disorganization and distractibility'.⁸ The drift of these kinds of descriptors beyond the clinic is a feature of both clutter and procrastination, as clinicians write popular self-help guides or appear as resident psychologists on reality TV programmes.⁹ Either way, the media spectacle of hoarding tends

to operate as a thin-end-of-the wedge phenomenon, alerting audiences to be wary of their own potential to develop unhealthy relationships to stuff.

Following Lefebvre, the title of this book appropriates the British vernacular phrase, 'neither use nor ornament', as a way of focusing attention on the 'reverse image' of contemporary personal productivity advice. To be 'neither use nor ornament' is to be both aesthetically worthless and redundant (the phrase applies to both people and things) and can be considered the reverse image to William Morris's aphorism 'have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful'.¹⁰ The William Morris law, as it is often known in the world of organisational self-help, operates as a rule of thumb for sorting out what matters: what to keep and what to throw away. This book is not only concerned with the discards – what is remaindered in the process of discerning what is beautiful and useful – it aims to promote them to the level of critique, offering a shadow portrait of the productive life. In his dialectical view of the everyday, Lefebvre grants critical potential to images of failure. Lefebvre's favourite reverse image, Charlie Chaplin's Tramp in his *Modern Times*, is acclaimed for his 'epic dimension', his capacity as 'the image of alienated man' to expose alienation 'by dishonouring it'.¹¹ If Ford staged lurid 'non-profit making' domestic and shop floor scenes as elements of his profit-sharing plan, Allen and his followers offer a no-less dramatic (possibly, more passive-aggressive) portrait of profitable and unprofitable practices.¹² Mixed in with all of the fun and the creativity of relaxed productivity, then, are powerful injunctions determining how *not* to live. The exalted actions of space clearing, decluttering and perpetually moving forward operate to denigrate notions of *stuckness* – of both things and energy – producing graphic images of failure as part of the blueprint of successful living.

So, for all the fun, sincerity and potential dividends of GTD[®], there is a side to Allen's system which calls, following Lefebvre's invitation, to be *dishonoured*. Ford's dream of uninterrupted conduct between home and factory, rather than dissipating in the twenty-first century has, it will be argued, received a stimulus package. Fordist attempts to control the workforce pale in the light of certain contemporary developments, which, this book contends, aim to fold every last aspect of existence into normative models of productivity, even sequestering play and creativity as a source of profit. Far from being a straightforward departure from Fordist discipline, GTD[®] and its various incarnations can be seen to function as a kind of *privatised and internalised Sociological Department*. The era of inspections and questionnaires might well be in the past but today we are encouraged to do it to ourselves, to self-monitor, micromanage and police our own profit-making schemes and living arrangements.

Clutter and procrastination are infra-ordinary, under-the-radar phenomena

Despite the existence of a vast self-help empire dedicated to clutter and procrastination, there is relatively little scholarly work on either subject that looks at the more mundane, quotidian side of questions concerning storage, attention and productivity. In the

Humanities and Social Sciences, there is important work that challenges the automatic assumption of clutter as a bad thing – or heap of bad things – but it tends to focus on the more spectacular phenomenon of hoarding. Scott Herring's *The Hoarders: Material Deviance in Modern American Culture*, for instance, provides a detailed historical approach that seeks to undermine the normativity that afflicts the framing of domestic relations to stuff in America.¹³ Likewise, Rebecca Falkoff's *Possessed: A Cultural History of Hoarding* explores particular sites where 'clashing perspectives about the meaning of things abound: the personal library, the flea market, the crime scene, the dust heap and the digital archive', in order to situate the figure of the hoarder on the fault line of modernity: as both its 'personification' and as 'an agent of [its] undoing'.¹⁴ Jennifer Howard's trade history of clutter combines a general sketch of the emergence of American consumer culture and household management with her own experience of decluttering her mother's house.¹⁵ While Howard's book looks to be about clutter, it leans more toward hoarding as its main subject, providing an exhaustive – and exhausting – account of dealing with the accumulated possessions of a parent, as a basis for thinking about bigger questions of consumer culture and environmental politics.

In the field of material culture, attention has tended to focus upon the 'social life of things' at the end of the consumption cycle: so, upon processes of wasting and discarding.¹⁶ This book shifts attention to a mostly neglected space: the grey zone that appears immediately after use and prior to the production of waste, where stuff is strewn or clotted or ignored or waiting or missing in action or simply hanging about in unsolicited clumps. Again, the emphasis is on the altogether more ordinary – and *infra-ordinary* – situation of things and energies, as they manifest in the clutter and procrastination of everyday life. The 'infra-ordinary' is Georges Perec's word to describe elements of everyday life that escape notice, that lurk between the lines of official records, that are simply too dull or banal to be registered or acknowledged.¹⁷ Clutter and procrastination are good examples of infra-ordinary phenomena and, until recently, have suffered from a lack of *critical* attention. Work that sits in this grey, infra-ordinary zone is thin on the ground. Notable exceptions are: Saulo B. Cwerner and Alan Metcalfe's exploration of storage discourses and practices in early twenty-first-century Britain; Sophie Woodward's recent ethnographic sociological work, which focuses on the detailed management clutter in the domestic interior; and Emma Casey and Jo Littler's article on 'cleanfluencer' Mrs Hinch and the reconfiguration of housework as a putatively therapeutic practice in the context of neoliberalism.¹⁸

Ethnographic studies focusing on everyday life often overlook the stubbornness of the material world and can paint a portrait of a world governed by rational actors manipulating an inert universe of things. Sarah Pink's *Situating Everyday Life*, for instance, places emphasis on activism and change, privileging flow, rather than friction, in the process.¹⁹ Likewise, Jeanne Arnold et al.'s *Life at Home in the Twenty-First Century*, while forming a valuable anthropological survey of contemporary domestic practices, privileges idealised notions of flow and proceeds from a largely normative notion of clutter as a challenge to be overcome.²⁰ Elizabeth Shove et al.'s *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life*, with its

attention to issues of stress and the complex temporality of the modern everyday is another exception but, despite its emphasis on practice and material culture, passes over the specific obstacles of clutter and procrastination.²¹ Melissa Gregg's *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy* is a closer relative to *Neither Use Nor Ornament* with its focus on the phenomenon of personal productivity; however, it is more oriented toward the sociology of work.²² There are, also, some significant overlaps with Joseph Reagle's *Hacking Life*, which maps the phenomenon of life hacking, but mentions procrastination only briefly. And while there is a chapter on stuff and the new minimalism, it takes a more straightforward narrative approach than this book and does not extend the material questions that are of concern here.

In the field of psychology, there is some interest in clutter and procrastination as conjoined phenomena but the emphasis is often continuous with, rather than critical of, self-help discourses. A recent special issue on clutter, procrastination and hoarding, for instance, warns of the potentially 'lethal' consequences of indecision.

Be it at our home, in our office or car, or dealing with other people, we all deal with clutter and procrastination in some way, shape or form. For many such procrastination is momentary and easily overcome with minimal effort, time, and attention. However, for some the procrastination lingers, decisions are not made or made rapidly and incorrectly. The result is indecision. Such indecision can be very damaging and, in some cases, life-threatening.²³

Procrastination is approached either as the direct cause of clutter, or else, clutter is read to be the predictor of procrastination.²⁴ Or procrastination is segmented into different variants (decisional, behavioural, chronic) that lead, nevertheless, to the same problem over time: 'As adults age, they typically amass more possessions, making clutter more problematic for individuals who don't routinely take time to purge.'²⁵ Either way, both are presupposed as problems that have the potential to lead, in a perfect storm, to catastrophe, and the practice of *routinely purging one's possessions* is utterly taken for granted.

The psychological literature also tends to offer ahistorical accounts, which paint individualised portraits of failure that, again, side with – rather than question – the hyperbole of self-help guidance. The idea that clutter and procrastination are issues that 'we all' face from time to time underplays the social and historical context of muddle and mess and despondency and exhaustion. The self-help industry is particularly fond of dismissing what it sees as a world of forces beyond human control, bracketing them out of consideration with vague notions such as *the outside*. So, popular literature on clutter and procrastination tends to place emphasis upon how we, *personally*, individually, respond to *outside pressures* such as the internet or the changing nature of work or economic competition.²⁶ Productivity blueprints, almost without exception, present a benign picture where life's ups and downs, bumps in the road and other vernacular framings of the outside and its vicissitudes, can be weathered with the right attitude: a

‘growth mindset’, for instance, or else an entrepreneurial, progression-based positive outlook.²⁷ Equally, the psychological framing of clutter and procrastination as potential problems tends to focus on individual personalities, either excising, or taking for granted, the world within which such individuals are operating.

Clutter and procrastination are social phenomena

This book is committed to a point-blank refusal of this kind of framing of the external world as something to be bracketed out or disregarded. Another – altogether more forceful – word for the outside is the *social*. Bland terms that pepper self-help guidance, like ‘environment’ or ‘the system’, ‘what happens’, ‘the economic situation’, ‘conditions’, ‘external circumstances’ or ‘influences’ operate to bind the outside (i.e. the social), in order to discount or ignore it, making it the sole responsibility of individuals. This fixation on personal failings and solutions is achieved only, it will be argued, by the drastic cutting of the structural inequalities, connections and ties that constitute social life. Tim Ingold calls these ties ‘the meshwork’: the intimate muddling of ‘entangled lines of life, growth and movement’ that make up the everyday.²⁸ While Kathleen Stewart would dispute that the outside is ever really outside, preferring to think of forces that ‘come to reside in experiences, conditions, things, dreams, landscapes, imaginaries, and lived sensory moments’.²⁹ The outside *gets in*, in the form of ‘atmospheric attunements’, which ‘have rhythms, valences, moods, sensations, tempos, and lifespans. They can pull the senses into alert or incite distraction or denial’.³⁰ To attempt to cast out social forces as somehow extraneous can be reconsidered, then, as a gesture akin to former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s sloganeering, ‘there is no such thing as society’: as a *political* cut that isolates subjects as individuals, who are then held to be morally accountable for their own uplift – or downfall.³¹

The recommendations of storage gurus, house doctors, life coaches, popular and clinical psychologists, behavioural economists, life hackers and productivity bloggers, almost without exception, tend to be individualistic in focus, telling ahistorical, moralistic stories of failed human lives. *Neither Use Nor Ornament* aims to challenge this framing and to thicken what, to date, have been rather thin descriptions of the *outside*, arguing that it is high time that the weight was lifted from the shoulders of individuals and distributed, instead, across a network of social forces. As the plan behind Ford’s Five Dollar Day shows, the link between domestic order and productivity has been with us for some time and so the reconstruction of this particular scene and other histories will go towards undoing some of the assumptions and judgements that inform the ways in which clutter and procrastination are thought of today.

The social past weighs heavily on the question of productivity, making the archive an especially important resource in undermining psychologised accounts of clutter and procrastination. It is a major contention here that both phenomena are *cultural formations* that assume their peculiar shapes in the crucible of industrial modernity. This means that there is no essential definition for either clutter or procrastination offered in these pages

but rather a focus on the *work* of definition, over time. As Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star note, the work of classification and definition is material, highly situated and, generally, comes with ‘attendant moral dimensions’.³² So, given this moral dimension, the point is not to arrive at a definitive sense of what clutter or procrastination *is*, but instead, as Richard Mabey says of weeds, to pull focus toward the very *action and process* of definition.³³ If, for Mabey, ‘the definition is the weed’s cultural story’, *Neither Use Nor Ornament* aims, likewise, to refocus normative definitions of making a mess and putting things off, so as to tell cultural stories about what it means to be productive – and unproductive – in particular times and spaces.³⁴

Important work that informs the historical work of this book includes Kristin Ross’s *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, which focuses on the technological and cultural transformations wrought by the modernisation, indeed Americanisation, of post-war France.³⁵ Jonathan Crary’s *Suspensions of Perception*, in a similar vein, establishes the importance of an attentive, above all, historicised approach to the questions of order, efficiency, and the remaking of Western subjectivity that accompanied the processes of modernisation between 1880 and 1905.³⁶ Deborah Sugg Ryan’s *Ideal homes, 1918–39: Domestic Design and Suburban Modernism* and Deborah Chambers’ *Cultural Ideals of Home: The Social Dynamics of Domestic Space* both offer useful histories of domesticity that complement the approach adopted in these pages.³⁷ However, *Neither Use Nor Ornament* differs by taking up the story of the remaking of both the home and human subject – the refinement of a productive and, above all, profitable dwelling and self – as we enter what has been termed the networked, information age. Again, the aim is to question the narrative of progress that comes as part and parcel of personal productivity strategy; the idea that we are, these days, in charge of ourselves – and free from the factory whistle and the office clock – is something that needs to be called into question.

Some methodological considerations and approaches

The notion of strategy, in Michel de Certeau’s sense of the word, is an important one here. Rather than focusing on what Certeau would see as the *tactical* decisions by users of things and spaces (i.e. how sociological respondents manage their time and their stuff, the ‘countless ways of ‘making do’), *Neither Use Nor Ornament* looks more closely at the *strategies* of decluttering and anti-procrastination advice, in order to question some of their fundamental assumptions.³⁸ While it is true that, as users and consumers, we invariably bricolage and *make do* when it comes to any encounter with a strategic plan (pedestrians take short cuts and etch their desire lines onto the built environment, for instance, which messes with the intentions encoded in architectural strategy and town planning), it also needs saying that such ‘ways of operating’ are always on the back foot. Tactics, Certeau argues, are constrained: ‘the space of a tactic is the space of the other’ and, so, ‘a tactic is the art of the weak’.³⁹ To neglect strategies, in favour of a focus on tactics, is, thus, to consign action to reaction. Tactics are, in their essence, hand-to-mouth manoeuvres, they cannot be banked or built upon – ‘what [a tactic] wins it cannot keep’ – nor can they

ever cease.⁴⁰ Much like a poacher's next meal, tactics exist in 'the chance offerings of the moment' and, so, are grabbed opportunities that open up in the 'cracks' of strategic surveillance and power structures.⁴¹

If a tactic is marked by an attitude of living on one's wits, a strategy can luxuriate in all of the time in the world – time, it needs noting, that can be converted into space. Certeau's prime example of this conversion is taken from cartography, where the lines on a street map, plotting the potential path of the pedestrian, compress time and space into a form that 'can be seized as a whole by the eye and read in a single moment'.⁴² Maps are not the only technology that can perform such a transformation, though, and Certeau outlines the key manoeuvres of management strategy – whether 'a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution' – as being determined by a concern to control time by establishing a place for its operations:

[Strategy] postulates a *place* that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be managed.⁴³

While tactics are no more than skirmishes, where social actors scrabble around looking to seize the moment to make something of their situation, strategies seize control of the game, first and foremost, via the 'mastery of time through the foundation of an autonomous place'.⁴⁴ This establishment of a place to operate is what allows those with strategic power to bank their gains, to secure their advantage, to plan, to dominate and, ultimately, to determine the rules of the game.

To translate all of this into terms useful to this project, the strategic blueprint of personal productivity, it will be argued, is underwritten by a series of deceptive manoeuvres, the majority of which need to be questioned. To begin with, the moves that establish a management base for the productive self are predicated upon the creation of an *exteriority*, an outside that is a potential threat and that needs to be managed. Both the target (relaxed productivity, doing more with less effort, working smarter not harder) and the threat (clutter, procrastination) are made manifest and, above all, *visible* through a sequence of actions that convert the muddle and mess of the world into something more readable, knowable and malleable. Certeau details the 'panoptic practice' at the heart of strategic rationality, 'whence the eye can transform foreign forces into objects that can be observed and measured, and thus control and 'include' them within its scope of vision'.⁴⁵ The ability to bundle a lively, quotidian scene, where things are scattered across a table into one that is afflicted by a single problematic object (clutter), hinges on a power play, it will be argued, that cuts into the everyday in order to control and capitalise upon it. Equally, the conversion of a situation where energies might be dissipated across a range of moods and demeanours (pausing, glancing, drifting off while reading, for example) into a typical case of inefficiency or procrastination – which is, in turn, subjected to a mathematical translation (into an economic forecast detailing the cost of such procrastination to

a nation's GDP, say) – presents an attempt to insert a business model as the core operating system of everyday life.

Some critics have already questioned the gains of framing personal life in business terms: Wendy Wheeler, for instance, identifies a 'managerial approach to living' that has recently leached into the everyday; likewise, Alan Liu draws attention to the cultural drift of 'neo-corporatism', with its agile workers, flexible contracts and just-in-time business models, into broader society.⁴⁶ Sharron Shatil sees in managerialism a new form of social dominance and, like Wheeler, questions 'the seepage of managerial approaches into all facets of life'.⁴⁷ *Neither Use Nor Ornament* continues this work but with more of an emphasis on the day-to-day management of muddle and mess, always with an eye on the yawning gap between the strategic self-help productivity plan and the more grounded reality of everyday, tactical encounters with stuff.

This book contends that it is at the strategic level that things need to change, so as to alleviate some of the burden that is dumped on individuals who find themselves snagged in their own stuff. While it is evident in ethnographic studies of clutter that householders are *always* tactically agile and shrewd in finding ways to deal with their material worlds, there is an abiding moral sense, not only that keeping hold of stuff is something that needs to be justified but that stuff is, in its very essence, bad. *Neither Use Nor Ornament* seeks to unravel some of the certainties that underpin the world of productivity self-help, particularly, the equation between material things and moral failing or weakness.

In its focus on strategy, this book has most in common with Casey and Littler's Mrs Hinch project, which pays close attention to the advice offered in the cleanfluencer's Instagram account, situating it within a history of housework and within the contemporary political landscape of neoliberal entrepreneurialism. Although Cwerner and Metcalfe begin by examining the discursive construction of norms around storage (i.e. strategy), their work predates the explosion of decluttering advice that manifests in the global success of Marie Kondo. And while they do identify a moral dimension to clutter and its accumulation, they stop short of anatomising the moral codes that are activated when things begin to pile up. Woodward's study is much more explicit in tracing the moral dilemmas and burdens that accrue in clutter and in detailing 'how people experience clutter as morally charged'.⁴⁸ It is also extremely valuable in detailing the tactical ingenuities of householders in dealing with their personal possessions, which, crucially, move in and out of the state of being considered as clutter over time. Even so, there is more than enough room for an account which seeks to dismantle the framework of assumption that sustains this morality and, so, the aim is to eliminate some of the moral pressures that are produced by the strategic rationality inherent in common definitions of clutter.

Solving the research problem of *how* to study infra-ordinary, nebulous, indeterminate phenomena like clutter and procrastination is quite a challenge when it comes to confronting the overwhelming heap of titles dedicated to both topics. An unscientific inventory points toward over 10,000 books on decluttering alone, while the internet drift of decluttering and anti-procrastination advice stretches to the outer reaches of the

observable web universe. What becomes clear when reading both print and digital advice, however, is the degree of repetition and overlap. This is prevalent, particularly, in the blogosphere, where digested versions of popular titles (Marie Kondo's *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying*, for example, not to mention Allen's *Getting Things Done*) circulate in cut-and-paste form.⁴⁹ What emerges when surveying this material can best be described as refrains, as repeated phrases that, over time, assume the status of received wisdom. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari grant critical potential to repeated phrases and their notion of the refrain or *ritournelle* can be used to complement Lefebvre's 'reverse image' as a way of focusing on the claims of decluttering and anti-procrastination advice from the side of their insistences.⁵⁰ If the *big others* of personal productivity – clutter and procrastination – can be brought into focus by paying attention to the shadows of self-help advice, there are, simultaneously, ways of tuning in, more directly, to the messages themselves, listening for their repetitions. The notion of the refrain, then, constitutes the *obverse image* in *Neither Use Nor Ornament* to Lefebvre's 'reverse image'.

The internet phenomenon of cut-and-paste can also be seen to operationalise the drift of a refrain that forms a shorthand moral injunction to declutter and seize the day. The Modernist mantra 'less is more' has been cut loose from its design origins, and these days circulates on- and off-line: in blogs, on websites as well as in the pages of more traditional intermediary forms such as lifestyle magazines and TV shows. Attributed to architect Mies van der Rohe, the phrase 'less is more', together with its contemporary twists – 'living more with less', 'less with less', 'owning less, working less, stressing less' – is an abiding theme in productivity advice, from Ford's time to the present.⁵¹ Where Ford hoped for *more from less* (increased output from his workers via the counterintuitive wage rise), Allen's relaxed productivity encourages a *worry less, do more* approach.⁵² *Less is more-ism* has since become spreadable, as memetic media, becoming part of a broader digital tapestry of ideas and opinions, which manifests as memes, inspirational posters, fridge magnets, Pinterest boards, self-help slogans, Facebook pages, vlogs and chat rooms, which upcycle quotations from modernist masters as timeless wisdom.⁵³ Looping endlessly in analogue and digital form, cut-and-paste modernism – *less is more* – circulates as normative discourse around minimalism: often as snide or direct judgement or as a sign of sophistication, as a way of life. *Less is more* is, in short, the dominant refrain of today's iteration of the productive life.

If cut-and-paste modernism underpins the strategic plan of decluttering and anti-procrastination advice, in doing so, it also helps to fabricate a *milieu*. As Isabelle Stengers explains, 'the question of the milieu' is complex and is one that involves negotiating environments that are 'infected' by refrains which make it possible or impossible to think in particular ways.⁵⁴ A milieu can be 'nourishing' or 'toxic' or both and, in being something that we are entangled and immersed in, constitutes a challenge for democratic thought.⁵⁵ In 'retelling the refrain about a milieu', Stengers aims to unravel its assumptions: its taken-for-granted premises and principles, its boundaries, its constitutive outside, its *others*.⁵⁶ As it will, hopefully, become clear over the pages of this book, the refrain *less is more*, despite the sincere intentions of its champions, can serve to furnish toxic milieux,

where the promised calm and stable atmosphere brought about by relaxed productivity descends into mania and exhaustion.

Refrains are also rhythmic. Deleuze and Guattari's figuration of a housewife, 'sing[ing] to herself, or listen[ing] to the radio, as she marshals the antichaos forces of her work', draws attention to the repeated practices that create a sense of home.⁵⁷ 'Home does not pre-exist' but is, rather, established *rhythmically*: dusting, sweeping, mopping (all regular, relentless sequences of wiping away dirt), tidying, moving things along, and whistling while you work, all function to establish a normative pace and pathway through the day, as a means of warding off the ever-present 'forces of chaos'.⁵⁸ As would-be problems affecting the *flow* of things and attention, clutter and procrastination can, thus, be figured as disorders of *rhythm*. Lefebvre's rhythm project, outlined in his *Rhythmanalysis*, extends Deleuze and Guattari's *ritournelle* to allow for the critical consideration of what is happening to human bodies at the level of the basic tempo of existence.⁵⁹ The ambition of flow as the optimum state (in Lefebvre's lexicon, *eurhythmia*) is often scuppered by rhythmic interferences, by what he refers to as *arrhythmias*, that is, mis-matched, stuttering, contrapuntal beats, affecting the relationship between the human body and the social world.⁶⁰ The rhythms of housekeeping, for instance, can vary wildly between slovenliness and obsessive, manic control (normatively conceived), and so determining what is an effective, healthy pace or a good design for living is not to be assumed. As will become clear, rhythmic 'disorders', can be figured as powerful *reverse rhythms* of the pulse of a particular cultural and historical moment, transforming cluttering and procrastinatory behaviours into effective instruments (in Lefebvre's thinking, 'metronomes'), capable of registering the normative order of things.⁶¹

That there is a moral dimension to rhythm can be seen, also, in the proliferation of disparaging words for arrhythmic relations to the world. The presence of layabouts, shirkers, malingerers, skivers, couch potatoes, ne'er do wells, clock-watchers, lead-swingers, slackers, slatterns, slovens, gold bricks, good-for-nothings, idlers, loafers, wastrels, slobs, and those who are told they are neither use nor ornament, evidences a formidable morality about being out of step with the rhythms of work and productive living. The object world, too, can be perceived as being out of step, and clutter is often pressed into service as witness for the prosecution: as recalcitrant things hanging about, shirking their responsibilities, or as snitches, betraying the laziness of their human masters. (Dust is especially vulnerable to being press-ganged into giving evidence for the prosecution as evidence of dysfunction.)

Biographies and small stories

The minimalist refrain, together with its tweaks and variations, is also used in this book as an organising device; the titles of the substantive chapters all riff on the aphorism 'less is more' as a way of gathering together and holding what threatens to be fugitive subject matter. Without meaning to cast aspersions upon those that have tried, there is no possibility of writing one singular, traditional history of either clutter or procrastination,

given that they are both remnants of normative notions of productivity. What is offered here, instead, is an ‘effective history’, following Michel Foucault’s impatience with grand, linear narratives of (capital H) History.⁶² The theoretical underpinnings of this particular take on history are elaborated in the next chapter but, for now, if a traditional history presents a smooth, orderly, seemingly objective account of the world, an effective history offers a motley, a miscellany, odds and ends that add up to more than the sum of their parts; where traditional history *tidies*, effective history *untidies*.

Even so, as thematically and textually satisfying as it may be, an untidy heap makes for a difficult, possibly annoying, read. Much like giving a tour around a hoarder’s house, some ordering and path-making is necessary, and so Foucauldian effective history is combined in these pages with the idea of cultural biography to produce an idiosyncratic life story of clutter and procrastination from 5 January 1914 to the present day. The decision to begin the story decisively, with the publicisation of Ford’s \$5 wage, is a calculated one, which aims to frame personal productivity within a longer time period and, following Kristen Ross, to restore history to the myth of capitalist modernity as ‘timeless’.⁶³ The shorthand, aphoristic version of modernism – *less is more* – is confronted with a more longhand account, which it will become clear, is an entirely more messy and muddled affair.

This use of cultural biography goes further than the ‘social life of things’ approach established by Arun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff, however, which not only tends to privilege success as the basis for writing object life stories but is quite anthropocentric in its orientation.⁶⁴ The biographies of huts, cars and television sets, for instance, are narrated in terms of their various stages of value, usefulness and semiotic significance in *human* life (i.e. how they function and what they mean for users). So, Kopytoff’s life story of the hut (among the Suku of what was then Zaire) is seen to reach its end with the victory of the termites, who bring about the hut’s collapse by collectively chomping through its walls. The life expectancy of the hut is determined solely in human terms (and granted a period of about ten years), which overlooks its nonhuman and broader ecological episodes (the neighbourhood renewal and land redevelopment programme materialised in the form of the termite mound, for instance). As will become clear, the more-than-human actor is conspicuous in its absence from the self-help and psychology-oriented pictures of clutter and procrastination. The overestimation of human agency in self-help is, then, to be challenged in this book by an appeal to the indispensable agency of the more-than-human: the objects, nonhuman animals, flora, bacteria and atmospheres that support, coexist with and frustrate human social existence.

In place of humanistic success narratives, *Neither Use Nor Ornament* focuses on the creaturely and minor details of twice-told tales and just-so stories, with the aim of opening them up to reconsideration. Isla Forsyth elaborates on Hayden Lorimer’s work about the power of the small story to disturb and unsettle assumption:

Lorimer (2003) has argued that creative biographies (constellations of sites, times, materials, perspectives and experiences) focused on ‘small stories’ can

be unsettling. This 'unsettling' is a tool for considering relations in the world, it figures the individuals at the centre as 'fluid and multiple' and always unknowable, the biographies themselves are not presented as 'systematic or sealed' but as lines that are contingent, partial.⁶⁵

The small story can pack quite a punch in reconfiguring the order of things and relations in the world. What follows is a series of small, more-than-human stories – involving penguins and fitted kitchens and tetrahedra and spinning tops and sock drawers and hostile architecture and listicles and USB coffee warmers – that are designed to unsettle and disturb the cliché of *less is more-ism*.

This book also takes lessons from Ursula K. Le Guin's essay, 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction', especially when it comes to the challenge of writing about drudgery and the shape and texture of such writing.⁶⁶ It is difficult, she argues, 'to tell a really gripping tale of how I wrested a wild-oat seed from its husk, and then another, and then another, and then another'.⁶⁷ The repeat clichés of prehistory – 'the mammoth hunters [that] spectacularly occupy the cave wall and the mind' – make for a more dramatic read, yet Le Guin contends that the first 'cultural device' was not a spear but a bag: a container to carry wild-oat seeds and other prizes home.⁶⁸ Bringing this realisation to her fiction writing, she details a gorgeously cluttered bag of ideas and poetic devices:

So, when I came to write science fiction novels, I came hugging this great heavy sack of stuff, my carrier bag full of wimps and klutzes, and tiny grains of things smaller than a mustard seed and intricately woven nets which when laboriously unknotted are seen to contain one blue pebble, an imperturbably functioning chronometer telling the time on another world and a mouse's skull; full of beginnings without ends, of initiations, of losses, of transformations and translations, and far more tricks than conflicts, far fewer triumphs than snares and delusions; full of space ships that get stuck, missions that fail and people who don't understand.⁶⁹

This book is offered in the spirit of Le Guin's essay, as an apparatus for conveying stories of what it means, and has meant, to try to *do* more with less. It is full of things smaller than a mustard seed, it has more snares than triumphs and even features a putative space ship that gets a bit stuck. Giving a social thought to personal productivity and its shadow conditions, it turns out, makes for a 'heavy sack of stuff', which is presented here as a 'cultural carrier bag' of *non-fiction*. The frame tale of Henry Ford and David Allen is, likewise, intended to serve as such a schlepping device: a carrier bag of non-fiction holding a century's worth of attempts to eliminate life's frictions. (This cluttered sack, it will become clear, is also intended as the direct opposite of professional organiser, Marie Kondo's routinely disciplined and clutter-free handbag.)

The structure of the book

Chapter 1 continues the theoretical work of this introduction by focusing upon the task of bringing *the outside* – as it tends to be thought of in self-help discourse – back into consideration, as *the social*. The chapter works through Bruno Latour's interrogation of the word 'social' in the social sciences and offers a necessarily lengthy account of what it means to instantiate human actions as social phenomena.⁷⁰ A good proportion of the discussion is concerned with Latour's contention that *objects are social*, which raises the further problem of how, precisely, to give them 'a social thought'.⁷¹ This makes for a particularly 'heavy sack of [theory] stuff' that aims to provide sufficient ballast to resist the individualised approach to clutter and procrastination that is a staple ingredient of self-help literature.⁷² While the question of object agency has become more elaborate and convoluted since Latour's appeal to a speculative 'parliament of things', the chapter draws upon feminist materialist approaches to cut through some of the denser thickets of recent object-oriented thinking.⁷³ The chapter also makes a case for thinking historically, following Foucault, and fleshes out the idea of an *effective* history of clutter and procrastination, as a way of undermining the moral tone of much decluttering and anti-procrastination advice.⁷⁴

Chapter 2 begins in Berthold Lubetkin's Penguin Pool in London Zoo, retelling the architectural story of 'less is more' with the aim of elbowing humans from the centre of the picture. This is, by no means, an original story. It is heavily indebted to Paul Overy's wonderful account of design modernism: *Light, Air and Openness*, for instance, and explores extant scholarship for details that can be put to use in a story that pushes nonhuman actors more to the front of the modernist stage.⁷⁵ As will hopefully become clear, modernist blueprints and plans are as nothing without *mycobacterium tuberculosis*, dust particles, sunlight, mountains, trees, house flies and spit. At the same time as design modernists were streamlining the interior, though, literary modernists were perfecting an altogether more unkempt, at times distinctly unhygienic, version of domestic space, often keeping company with feral agents and nonhuman animals. Avant-gardist quarrels with principles of hygiene feature prominently in Bohemian ideas of the artist as genius, with the cluttered artist's garret operating as the material expression of creative energy. Taken together, these competing expressions of being modern introduce considerable tensions into the origin story of when less became more.

Chapter 3 takes up the American episode of the story of design modernism by looking at two architectural prototypes: R. Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion Dwelling Machine and Charles and Ray Eames' Case Study House, together with their overlapping ideas of doing *more with less*. By focusing upon the seemingly anomalous element in both design projects – clutter – the aim is to untidy the yesterday's homes of tomorrow narrative that has tended to haunt the careers of both Fuller and the Eameses. Much has been made of the seeming contradiction between Fuller's architectural vision and what is seen as his overblown archive, for instance. Seen as a material form of bluster, matched only by his verbose and cluttered language, the archive has been read to evidence Fuller's

failure as an architect and designer. Likewise, Ray Eames' relations to objects has been read to betray her hoarding tendencies, with the interior of the Case Study House being cluttered with things. In both cases, it will be argued that clutter is less of a design contradiction than a deliberate technique: of materialising the process of knowledge work on the part of Fuller and, with respect to the Eameses, of playing with what they termed 'functioning decoration' and of experimenting with the 'new covetables' (ideas and concepts over material things).⁷⁶

Chapter 4 brings us into the present and enters the contemporary story of clutter through the kitchen drawer. Over the past twenty or so years, the process and practice of decluttering has come into its own as a species of lifestyle television, where house doctors and storage gurus, often with their patented methods, help us deal with our stuff. This chapter explores the refrains and reverse images that run through the phenomenon of decluttering, taking in television, print publishing, blogs, vlogs and social media influencers. Above all, the chapter's aim is to amplify the wildness of things and to show how decluttering is a new means of ridding and wasting, which is entirely at odds with its environmental alibi. Here the distinction between objects and things becomes crucial, as does the temporal dimension of stuff. Following the instructions of Marie Kondo, for instance, it is clear that it is *objects* (anthropologically conceived) that 'spark joy' and that earn their keep.⁷⁷ And clutter, as distinct from waste, can be glossed as *matter yet to find a place* and, in the homes of minimalists, as *matter out of time*.

Chapter 5 picks up the question of rhythm by looking at the idea of everyday life as something that can itself be hacked. The phenomenon of life hacking, from its origins in Silicon Valley, was born out of procrastination and seeks to use counterintuitive systems and coding tricks to deal with information-overload and flagging motivation. Looking specifically at advice on dealing with procrastination and at David Allen's GTD[®] system, which functions, effectively, as the operating system of life hacking, this chapter argues that there is an insidious, even unhealthy element to the anti-procrastination hack. Rhythmically speaking, the goal of relaxed productivity turns out to be always-on, relentless productivity: keeping calm and carrying on and on and on and on, ad infinitum. Furthermore, the appeal to neurobiology or, at the very least, to self-reliance, in much of the guru literature on procrastination paints a picture of plastic, malleable brains and psychologies that need to adjust to fixed social factors (such as the economy). By bringing Foucault's notion of genealogy into the procrastination equation, a very different portrait is allowed to emerge, one that is less based in biology – neuro or otherwise – than in *biopower*. Seen as a cultural formation, procrastination conforms to a distinctly Foucauldian pattern, in that it emerges as pathology within the context of specific disciplinary regimes: the factory, the military and the clinic. So, what we might apprehend today as an all too human tendency to put things off can be seen as forged in the crucible of particular, industrial institutions.

Above all, this book aims to offer a counter narrative to *less is more-ism*. By bringing the outside back in, as a more fully-fledged consideration of the social, and in pulling the focus from humans to include things, objects, creatures, atmospheres, and more-than-human

encounters, a tidy story of a century's worth of attempts to tidy up will be effectively untidied. Instead of seeing clutter and procrastination as obstacles to overcome, then, the obstacles themselves are allowed to assume a central role in what follows as a revised and messy story of twentieth- and twenty-first-century organisational culture.

Notes

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